

Education

I believe as a federal lawmaker it is important to be visible and available to young people. To that end, I have made hundreds of school visits and try to visit every high school in the district at least once every two years.

When parents send their children to school, they entrust teachers and staff with the most precious people in their lives. We must insist that all children receive the very finest education possible and ensure that teachers, principals, and staff are all well-qualified and well-supported in their mission.

As the son of a public school teacher, and as a former university and community college instructor, education is not just a political issue for me, but something I am passionate about and to which I have dedicated much of my life. I believe our education system today is facing challenges on many fronts, but I do not believe the solution is to simply throw money at the problem.

The first and most important responsibility falls with parents and students themselves. As parents, we all need to set high standards for our children and insist they do the hard work it takes to master the basics of the good old "three Rs": Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. We also need to teach the values of two more "Rs" - Respect and Responsibility. We must insist that our young people develop the critical thinking skills that are essential to the modern work force.

This year, Congress will re-examine the No Child Left Behind Act to ensure that it gives the teachers the tools they need to educate our children to succeed in life, rather than for just a test. I have supported legislation to modify educational programs for students with special needs and to fully meet the federal responsibility for funding these programs.

We often talk about making college more affordable for students, but too often overlook career and technical education training. I have co-founded the Congressional Career and Technical Education Caucus to stress the importance of career and technical education programs, and to support initiatives that provide youth and adults with the skills they need for good paying jobs that help our communities stay competitive.

At the college level, we must continue to strengthen our community

college system, as well as our four year institutions. Students should not have to leave college burdened with enormous debt, and those who are carrying existing student loans should be able to refinance those loans at lower rates if they are available.

The success of our education system today will determine the success of our nation tomorrow. We simply must do better from pre-school on up through graduate school.

Improving Math & Science Education

Our students must be provided with well-trained math and science teachers and state-of-the-art curriculums to keep pace with today's job markets. As the chairman of the Research and Science Education Subcommittee, a member of the House Science Committee, Congressman Baird believes we must improve the performance of our young people in science, technology, and mathematical fields.

In 2007, Congressman Baird helped author the America COMPETES Act. This landmark, bipartisan legislation makes substantial improvements to math and science education, including establishing a program at the National Science Foundation to create more qualified teachers in science and math fields, and strengthened the nation's commitment to scientific research. The America COMPETES Act, which was celebrated by educators and businesses, was signed into law in August of 2007.

Expanding Access to Career and Technical Education

Career and Technical Education provides opportunities for students to apply their learning in relevant, real world situations. It helps students acquire the employability and leadership skills that will enable them to succeed both in the workplace and in higher education. In recognition of this, Congressman Baird founded the Congressional Career and Technical Education Caucus. This Caucus works to increase awareness of the importance of career and technical education in Congress, supports funding and resources, and promotes legislation that benefits career and technical education.

It is clear that there is a growing demand for skilled workers in America. Career and technical education programs address this need by focusing education and job training skills in those areas with the greatest need. In fact, according to the Bureau of Labor Standards' projections, 8 of out of the top 10 occupations with the largest job growth through 2014 will require an associate's degree or career and technical training. In preparing for a well-educated and skilled workforce in America, career and technical education is crucial in providing youth and adults with the skills they need in a competitive global economy.

Increasing Access to Foreign Language Education

The United States is facing a language gap that has the potential to damage our global economic competitiveness. Economically, we must be prepared to tap into emerging global markets like China and India. While millions of Americans study foreign languages, the overwhelming majority of class enrollment is in Spanish, French, or German. Unfortunately, that enrollment balance does not reflect the economic realities of the 21st century.

Congressman Baird believes we must ensure that our children and grandchildren have the tools that they need to remain competitive in the future global economy. The ability to speak the languages of emerging economies will help U.S. businesses and protect American jobs.

Responding to this need, Congressman Baird has introduced the National Foreign Language Coordination Act. This legislation would establish a National Language Director and create a National Foreign Language Coordination Council to develop and oversee the implementation of an American foreign language strategy, including strengthening foreign language education programs and standards.

Congressman Baird has also introduced the Access to Language Education Act. This legislation would create a federally-sponsored video programming channel on the Internet focused on providing foreign language instruction. Instruction would be provided for languages that are not widely taught in educational institutions in the U.S., but that are likely to have significant value for our country in global competitiveness, trade, international relations, national security, and defense.

Helping Pay for College

Federal college loan programs help students realize their dreams and potential by assisting with rising tuition expenses. Unfortunately, in an effort to reduce the federal deficit, the Administration has regularly proposed cuts to the student loan program. Congressman Baird believes this approach is short-sighted. The economic benefit to our country from having a highly educated, well-trained workforce overshadows the relatively insignificant savings derived from cuts to student loan programs.

Earlier this year Congressman Baird voted in support of the College Student Loan Relief Act. This legislation will cut the interest rate on new student loans in half over a five-year period. He also supported the House Fiscal Year 2008 budget, which provides for an increase in the maximum Pell Grants award. He also voted for the College Opportunity and Affordability Act, which passed the House in February of 2008. The legislation includes important measures to make college more affordable and accessible.

Congressman Baird is also working to expand financial aid opportunities for students attending college on a less than half-time basis. Current restrictions on financial aid programs prohibit most adult part-time students from receiving assistance to enroll in higher education. To be eligible for federally subsidized loans, a student must attend classes on at least a half-time basis. This restriction means that a large number of undergraduates are ineligible to participate in the largest financial aid program of the federal government. Less-than-half-time enrollment allows students to balance the demands of school, work, and family. It also has been found to be less intimidating for students who have been away from school and to allow them to take the steps necessary to adjust to academic life.

That is why Congressman Baird recently introduced the College Affordability for Working Students Act. This bill aims to create a demonstration program at up to 100 institutions to provide direct and guaranteed loans to less-than-half-time students.

Congressman Baird also passed a successful amendment to the Higher Education Reauthorization Act to require the Secretary of Education to conduct a study and make recommendations on expanding aid available to less than half-time students.

Reforming No Child Left Behind Act

As a former educator, Congressman Baird knows firsthand that administrators, teachers, and parents understand the needs of their districts best and ought to have substantive input in how federal

education funds are put to use.

Signed into law on January 8th, 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was designed to increase accountability, provide for greater local control, allow parents more options, and give support for proven teaching methods. This mission to improve teaching methods and raise student achievement is indeed important. However, since the law's enactment, the Administration has failed to request, and Congress has failed to provide, the full funding levels authorized by the NCLB. In fact, many of the changes NCLB made have left school districts struggling to meet the requirements laid out in the law. NCLB standards also unfairly grades schools with higher numbers of severely disabled students on the same level as those without large special education programs.

Congressman Baird strongly believes that while the intentions of NCLB may have been constructive, Congress ought to listen to feedback from parents, teachers, and administrators and revise the law to correct its shortcomings. He also believes Congress and the president must fulfill their promise and fully fund NCLB.

Congressman Baird has met with numerous education groups to understand their priorities for this legislation and how NCLB has affected students. He has been working with the House Education Committee to ensure that they provide for the modification of educational programs for students with special needs, meet the federal responsibility for funding these programs, and include common-sense requirements regarding the testing of students.

Congressman Baird is also a cosponsor of the Keeping Our Promises to America's Children Act of 2007. This bill requires full funding of the No Child Left Behind Act, and prohibits the U.S. Department of Education from imposing sanctions, penalties, or other negative consequences if states modify or delay the implementation of programs that receive less than full funding.

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Helping Rural Counties Build Strong Schools

Rural counties, such as Skamania and Lewis in Southwest, Washington, receive lower tax revenues because of the concentration of federal lands in their county boundaries. To provide these communities with much-needed resources, Congressman Baird helped pass the bipartisan Secure Rural Schools legislation. The Secure Rural Schools program allows counties to receive federal financial assistance based on the average of the top three annual revenues they received from timber harvest on federal lands from 1985 to 1999. The funding is provided for rural county schools and other essential services. More than 4,400 schools and 700 counties nationwide have benefited from the law.

The original legislation expired in 2006, but Congressman Baird helped secure a one year extension of the program in 2007 and is now working for another extension for 2008. He is also an original cosponsor of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Reauthorization Act, which will extend this important program through 2013.

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